

Lessons Learned, Lessons Relearned, and Lessons

Wisdom for the unemployed librarian

By Nathan Aaron Rosen

Losing your job can be a catastrophic and life-altering event. In an instant, everything changes and facing the loss of income and insurance—and the feeling of rejection—can be devastating. But it is not the end. As every door closes, a new door opens, and if you can be open to the experience, it can lead to a new, different, and better chapter in your life.

The lesson for me and about 5,300 fellow employees started in December 2008 when we were terminated as part of a massive RIF (reduction in force). At the time, everything seemed great and what happened was a total surprise. And so I learned my first lesson—in this economy nobody is safe. I was reminded of the lesson that goes back thousands of years. The lesson relearned was that it is not by one's individual power, might, or hand does one receive wealth, but through the grace of God.

While the loss of a job is overwhelming, you must not permit it to overshadow all other aspects of your life. The only way to survive this loss is to acknowledge that your job is only one slice of your life. A job is but a means to an end, not the end itself. Accepting that a particular job is not everything was a hard lesson for me to learn and relearn. When I forget, I am reminded by my kids.

Loss Happens to Everyone

Job loss happens to most people at least once in their careers and often more than once. It is a traumatic experience even when caused by the economy rather than by your individual performance. As of December 2009, more than eight million jobs have been lost during the recession, and the unemployment rate is nearing 10 percent.

Job loss is similar to the loss of a loved one. Psychiatrist and author Elisabeth Kubler-Ross identified the five stages of grief after the loss of someone close as denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Although the loss of a job may not be as traumatic as the death of a parent, many may still experience those same stages,

with the exact length and severity depending on age, responsibilities, and life situation. The grief felt after losing a job is often felt more deeply as a person gets older and has more responsibilities.

If you can recognize the stages and accept them as normal, you will be able to move through them faster. For me, it helped to remember the old saying that bad things happen to good people. Ultimately everyone has to learn to live with loss. So try to recognize the stage that you are currently in, feel it, understand it, recognize that it is only temporary, and work to move on.

Negotiate

Nearly every article one reads recommends that you should negotiate when being let go and so I tried it—and was unsuccessful in improving the standard package. Consider consulting an attorney, or at minimum discussing the package with others who have experienced layoffs. After talking to a wide variety of people, I found out that for the vast majority, negotiations were not successful. However, even if the outcome does not result in a change, you will feel empowered that you at least had the presence of mind to try.

Whatever Happened Is for the Best, Even if We Do Not Understand It

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche is often quoted as saying, "whatever does not destroy me, makes me stronger." While I will not swear to the truth of that statement, I think that events that happen to us can either break us or teach us important lessons. In the long run, our lives may actually be improved by the difficulties we encounter and the lessons we learn. Therefore, be positive because it is always better to look on the brighter side of things. You have to believe that there is a job out there for you.

Try to avoid negative people and be grateful for every part of your life, such as family, friends, health, and spiritual life. At this stressful time, some people join a gym, start running, catch up with books they have always wanted to read,

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Learned the Hard Way



visit friends they haven't seen for a while, take long hikes in neighborhoods they have always wanted to explore, spend time with their family, go to museums and gardens, or volunteer more at charitable institutions that help others.

Reach out and Get Help

You are not alone. Support groups and counseling exist to help people recognize that everyone is not alone and what an individual is experiencing is normal and will pass. Outsiders may provide many valuable suggestions because of their distance from the situation. Ultimately, you will come to recognize that the layoff was not your fault. Chances are you will also become a stronger and more empathetic person from facing the difficulties of a job loss.

This Is Not a Sprint

Historically, job searches were like a sprint—short, intense, fast moving, and very focused. But currently, the job search is more like a marathon. More than a third of unemployed people have been jobless more than six months. Whereas common wisdom used to say a job search would take one month for every ten thousand in salary, you should anticipate that the search may take substantially longer. This means you must pace yourself, plan, consider all the alternatives, prioritize, and think creatively. Be careful not to burn out too quickly because the search could be much longer than you expect.

Times Are A-Changin'—Now and Forever

As everyone knows, change is constant. The ability to adapt and ultimately thrive will depend upon our willingness to accept that things change, both for the better and for the worse. Develop the techniques and mindset to accept change and move on to the next chapter of our lives.

Look forward to the future, rather than looking back to the past, even though doing so is very difficult. Nobody can change what happened yesterday but you can affect what will happen tomorrow. You must try to accept the present and move on.

Don't Bear Grudges—They Hurt You More than Anyone

Avoid holding onto grievances towards former bosses or employers. It will only hurt you and prevent you from putting the experience behind you and getting on with your life. Holding on to resentments is like carrying around extra weights; it is baggage that you do not need. But by shedding the resentment, you lighten your psychological load, which will allow you to move with greater speed and agility.

You never know whom you might work for, or with, in the future—it could be your old employer or boss. As economic conditions improve, many companies are recalling previously laid-off workers. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, nearly a third of employers expect to recall at least some of their terminated workers. Even if you are not rehired by the same employer, the connections you make with your superiors, your fellow workers, and your subordinates can be a benefit or detriment to you. Which it will be depends upon how you handle exiting your previous position.

Getting a Job Is a Job

Recognize that getting a job is a job—a full-time job. Plan to be as hard working, focused, and dedicated in your job search as you were in any position you have ever held. Your mission is to identify employment opportunities, research companies, discover people who are potential employers, prepare for interviews, and follow up. You should create regular specific work hours and timelines with clear specific mini-goals and deadlines. Utilize every available resource in your job search. Remember to include library associations, state and federal government agencies, job agencies, and religious organizations.

Stay Connected

Stay in touch, informed, and connected. It is easy to lose touch with your former coworkers, fellow librarians, and with what is going on in the profession when you can no longer be found in the same place five days a week for at least 40 hours. Instead, take this opportunity to increase your professional involvement—go to more programs, talk to more people, hand out your newly created personal business cards, volunteer, and follow up with people you have talked to. Those activities will not only help you find a new job, they will enrich your professional life when you return to work.

While I was in between jobs, I had the special opportunity to make presentations to a wide variety of groups that I might never have had the chance

to speak with if I had been working full-time. I conducted training sessions for a legal trainers group, the Law Library Association of Greater New York, my synagogue, and the New York chapter of the Special Libraries Association. Take this opportunity to write that article you always wanted to write or to speak on something that you would like to share. Those activities will be great for improving your sense of worth, improving your credentials, increasing the number of people who know you, and providing you with a chance to get to know some people who might ultimately be useful in your job search.

The more people you connect with, the more opportunities you will have to market yourself.

Do Your Homework and Be Prepared

As librarians it is only natural that we should educate ourselves as much as possible about the firms we are going to interview with, their histories, lines of business, technology, clients, and staff.

Take this occasion to think about how you want to market yourself to your next employer. Create a website, a blog, a separate e-mail address for your professional activities, and always carry a good supply of your own newly created business cards to liberally distribute. Business cards are very useful; in addition to marketing yourself you can use the back to take notes about the person you just met. Expand your network and collect other people's business cards if for no other reason than to check to see if your card is more or less memorable or effective. When you meet someone new, remember to follow up with a note so that you reinforce his or her memory of you, as well as improve the likelihood of starting an ongoing conversation with him or her.

Practice Makes Perfect

Practice, practice, practice interviewing skills. As my brother says, interviewing is like high school and college debate. You succeed by practicing in real-life situations. This improves your skills and lowers your threshold of anxiety. You should strive to make your performance flawless, and you can do this by anticipating and preparing for the hard questions. As there are always a wide variety of interviewers, expect and prepare for all of them. During the interview you should be cool, confident, and calm. Accepted wisdom dictates you should dress similarly to those at the top level of the firm, or at least one level higher than the people interviewing you.

Some people contend that interviewing is just like dating—don't appear desperate or you'll scare them

away. You might want to repeat silently to yourself, "This is not the first or last interview in my life. There will be others." Remember that the interview is a chance to decide if this is where you want to work. So dress and act like someone with whom this interviewer would want to spend time.

Additionally, you should pay careful attention to the goals of the organization and their obstacles. If the interviewer does not provide this information, ask what the goals and obstacles are, and state how your background can assist with overcoming their challenges. Reinforce your expertise in a follow-up letter, and make sure it is much more than a meaningless thank you note. Your follow-up letter is a continuation of the discussion of what you can bring to the employer and why it would be in his or her best interest to hire you.

You Never Know

Even if you are not looking for a new job, you should be on the watch for employment openings. Some suggest that you should apply for any appropriate job and take the opportunity to be interviewed. You can always use the practice, and you never know when you might find the perfect fit. You should work and rework your resume and always make sure to collect and document your achievements.

Some people find it helpful to have lunch with employed friends and ask for thoughts and suggestions on their resumes. It's the best of both worlds—networking and resume improvement. Keep a master version of your resume that includes absolutely everything you might ever need as well as multiple working versions tailored to different types of jobs. For example, one resume might emphasize research, while another highlights your management skills, etc.

To have the best possible resume, examine the widest variety of job descriptions to identify key terms, and make sure to integrate them in your resume. This will make it apparent to the human resources professionals who screen the resumes that you would be the right person to select for an interview.

Grab Their Attention

It goes without saying that you have to develop an exciting resume describing your objective accomplishments, design a stirring cover letter, and write engaging follow-up letters to keep the lines of communication open. Strive to do more—turn the entire situation around and think about what the company wants and needs and then figure out how to meet their needs. As has been said many times, don't just state your role—document your achievements and

Need Job Search Help?

There are infinite online and print resources for today's job-seeking librarians. Here are just a few you may find useful.

Librarian Career Centers

AALL Career Center
www.aallnet.org/careers

American Library Association Toolkit for Getting a Job in a Tough Economy
www.ala.org/ala/educationcareers/employment/index.cfm

Special Libraries Association Career Center
www.sla.org/careers

Library-Specific Job Lists
AALL Career Center
www.aallnet.org/careers

American Library Association
<http://joblist.ala.org> and
www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/lita/litaresources/litajobsite/litajobsite.cfm

The Information Society for the Information Age
www.jobtarget.com/home/index.cfm?site_id=180

General Job Sites that Combine Many Sites

Career Builder
www.careerbuilder.com

CareerJet
www.careerjet.com

Company website collection
www.linkup.com

Indeed
www.indeed.com

Job Central
www.jobcentral.com

JobAngels
www.jobangels.com (or on Facebook, LinkedIn, or via Twitter [#jobangels])

Monster
www.monster.com

NY State Department of Labor
www.labor.state.ny.us/careerservices/careerservicesindex.shtml

The Job Planet
www.thejobplanet.com

USA Federal Government
www.usajobs.com

Yahoo Hotjobs
<http://hotjobs.yahoo.com>

Area-Specific Sites

Craigslist
<http://craigslist.org>

Northeast United States
<http://slanyjobs.blogspot.com>

Industry-Specific Sites

Academic
<http://careers.arl.org/resources/careers/index.shtml>

www.academiccareers.com
<http://chronicle.com/section/Jobs/61>
www.educause.edu/jobs?tid=16500&bhcp=1,
www.higheredjobs.com/admin/search.cfm?JobCat=34

Law
www.lawjobs.com
www.careers.findlaw.com
www.hg.org/law-jobs.asp

<http://lawlibrariansofleisure.com>

Medical
www.mlanet.org/jobs/jobs.html

General Sites

Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Outlook Handbook—Librarians
www.bls.gov/oco/ocos068.htm

Employment Spot
www.employmentspot.com

Library Information Science Career Strategies for Librarians
www.liscareer.com/index.htm

New York Public Library Employment Site
www.nypl.org/links/index.cfm?Trg=1&d1=175&d3=Employment

Quintessential Career
www.quintcareers.com

Riley Guide
www.rileyguide.com

U.S. News & World Report, Best Careers 2009: Librarian
www.usnews.com/money/careers/articles/2008/12/11/best-careers-2009-librarian.html

Books

G. Kim Dority, *Rethinking Information Work: A Career Guide for Librarians and Other Information Professionals* (Libraries Unlimited 2006).

Rachel Gordon, *What's the Alternative: Career Options for Librarians and Info Pros* (Information Today 2008).

Richard Murray, *A Day in the Life: Career Options in Library and Information Science* (Libraries Unlimited 2007).

Priscilla Shontz, *The Librarian's Career Guidebook* (Scarecrow Press 2004).

successes, and quantify the results and their business impact.

A given in today's world is to keep your resume current even if you are not looking because you never know when you will need to look for a new job. This is a lesson that I knew once, but forgot during my 11 years at the same job. So be prepared.

Make Yourself Indispensable

Everyone has heard the expression "make yourself indispensable." In today's world that phrase translates to more than just working very hard each and every day. It means focusing on how you can provide a significant value-added service that benefits the organization. But do not ever forget that at the end of the day, *nobody* is really indispensable. If you can identify what your company really needs and then visibly and tangibly contribute towards meeting those needs, you will be on your way to becoming successful.

Consider trying to excel in an area in which your boss is weak in order to complement him or her. Think of ways to save money, find tasks that can be done better, volunteer to take ownership of projects, and increase your visibility. While librarians are particularly poor at making people aware of the wide variety of ways they contribute, if you can do so, it will set you apart from the crowd and increase your perceived value to the organization.

Listen and Then Listen Even More Carefully

We must become active listeners, listening not only to what is said, but even more carefully to *how* it is said, i.e., the nuances of what is said and what is omitted. It is easy to hear what you want to hear or just hear the words and stop listening.

At the same time, don't panic at every possible danger or negative sign. A lot of what you hear will be irrelevant.

Think Outside the Box

If everyone is following the same traditional job search strategy, then the probability is very low that it will be of much help. A lesson relearned is to go above and beyond the traditional approach. Consider the path less taken and the path not taken—you should take both paths, in addition to the traditional path. Remember that the entire legal industry has changed. Consequently, take a good hard look at our own skill set and consider how it can fit into other fields, other types of employment, and other types of positions.

It's Not What You Know but Who You Know—At Least to Get in the Door

Common wisdom suggests that who you

know is critical to getting a job. Some commentators suggest that somewhere between 50 to 70 percent of jobs are filled by networking and informal contacts. It can be easy to forget about the importance of people as you focus on want ads, headhunters, and online job search engines.

I had to relearn the lesson that ultimately the key is people. Identify and reach out to the individuals who can help you locate a job. Other times the people you need are those who can provide deep background on potential firms and people, or who can personally recommend you to the decision makers.

Become LinkedIn

LinkedIn provides you access to more people than you directly know. It expands your horizons by connecting you to the connections of your connections. As in the play and later film *Six Degrees of Separation*, LinkedIn provides you access to a much broader world of connections than you knew you had.

Possessing a vibrant, information-packed online social networking presence is fundamental to succeeding in today's virtual world. You absolutely have to build a rich, attractive profile, make connections, join groups, post articles, and grow your network. More than one half of all jobs are currently filled by way of networking and informal contacts.

LinkedIn provides you with a critical communication tool if you are laid off and no longer have access to your previous channels of communication. Without LinkedIn, if you lose your job, you are very limited in your ability to communicate your changed situation and to let people know how to contact you. LinkedIn provides you with a bridge to alert people about what occurred and how to contact you now. It is also a great way to gather unsolicited recommendations from former colleagues. Martindale-Hubbell Connected, Legal OnRamp, the American Bar Association's LegallyMinded, and Facebook also often fill some of the same purposes.

You Are a Professional—Continue to Be a Professional

It is critical to continue to network through your professional memberships. You could have all journals and correspondence mailed to your home address even if your employer pays for your professional memberships. Not only are you more likely to read this material at home, but having your home as your contact address will limit the damage in the event of a layoff. This way you will still have access to any employment opportunities and professional development offered by the organization. Alternatively, if you decide to have the

office address as your primary location, at least keep a file of all memberships and organizations at home so that you can easily rejoin them with your personal e-mail address.

Now that you have the time, you should really investigate all that the American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) has to offer—you will be pleasantly surprised how much value you can gather from various association memberships. Vendors also can provide you with great information and opportunities. Now you may have the time to get advanced and specialized training that you were previously too busy to obtain. Attending vendor training can also supply the side benefit of providing networking opportunities as well as an additional avenue for employment possibilities. By being out there talking to people, you increase the likelihood of hearing about temporary or consulting assignments while illustrating the fact that you are constantly improving your skills.

Remember that AALL and other librarian organizations have established career centers and have expended significant time and effort to develop resources for the newly unemployed. Make sure that you utilize their efforts to the max.

Keep a Copy

You should keep copies at home of all important e-mails, positive comments made about you, your performance reviews, your accomplishments, significant projects, and information about your contacts. You never know when you might need them but no longer have ready access to your office, your files, your documents, and your e-mail contacts.

Of course, you should never violate the law or company policies, or take confidential, proprietary, or material non-public information, but you have a right to keep a copy of your most significant work. After you have been let go, retrieving that information is often impossible or at best very difficult and time consuming. It would be very depressing to go back to pick up your personal possessions and have your former employer review item by item what you want to download from your former work station computer—so be prepared.

In today's world of long office hours, many of us transact all of our librarian professional association activities and a certain portion of our personal activities at work. Therefore, it is critical to schedule regular backup of key information to our home in order to ensure continued access to our professional and personal information. While I have always done that,

I nevertheless had to relearn that lesson —even a lag of only a month in backing up your information can cause a substantial disruption in your professional and personal communication and activities. I have learned that while it may never be possible to continuously back up everything, the more often the better. I promise you the extra time and effort is worth it. Having everything you need at home will ease the transition from work and make it less painful in so many ways.

Tried and True Sometimes Works the Best

When I talked about new cutting-edge technologies and approaches, my mother, Golda Rosen, used to remind me not to forget the historically tried-and-true methods, as those are often built on the results of many lessons learned.

I found that it is worthwhile to make sure that you do *all* the things that job searchers throughout history have done, even if you think that it is unlikely to be fruitful. You never know—it might help you get the job, and, if not now, maybe later. Don't forget about reaching out to headhunters and recruiting people. As a profession, recruiters are hurting and therefore may have the time and willingness to really talk about your resume and how to best present your experience and accomplishments. Remember that while employment agencies might not have any jobs at this time, headhunters still have a lot of connections and can be a valuable asset in a job search. And don't forget the state labor office and social welfare organizations because they have vast experience with assisting the unemployed.

The most significant lesson I learned, relearned, and then learned the hard way was to *be prepared*. Just as Benjamin Franklin used to say, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. So prepare yourself with the information network that you will need when unemployed. That will make the transition substantially less painful and speed you on your way to recovery and a wonderful new chapter in your life.

Note: All of the opinions and statements within this article are those of the author alone and do not in any way, shape or form, reflect the opinion or position of any of his past or current employers. ■

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